



Anthropology

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Tattoo, Cultural Heritage and Globalization*

Abstract

Tattooing and body modification in general have to be also considered in relation to the issue of intangible heritage. There are many cultures of the world which had a rich tradition in tattooing and because of direct or indirect Western influence they have lost this tradition or it is in the process of extinction. More and more, the body does not reflect any more particular worldviews of particular cultures or societies but uniformized attitudes coming from dominant paradigms. We know that globalization is changing our world and according to this, globalization is also changing the relationship people have with their own bodies. In this article I will focus on two very concrete cases: the Li people in Hainan, in China, and the example of the population in Equatorial Guinea, in west central Africa.

Keywords: body modification, tattoo, cultural heritage, globalization, equatorial guinea, hainan

“En mythe ou en rite, en danse ou en transe, en stase ou en extase, le corps demeure au centre d’un système de montages symboliques, noeud de relations avec le monde extérieur. Il irradie dans toutes les sphères culturelles [...] parce que le monde ne se constitue qu’à travers des pratiques sensibles et que le corps est le foyer de toutes nos communications avec autrui” (Riviere, 1995:161)

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As anthropology centers on the study of culture, this discipline has always been interested in what we today denominate *cultural heritage* – material as well as intangible. Obviously, what we may understand as *cultural traditions* of a given society will never be exactly the same as *cultural heritage*. While there may be *good* and *bad* traditions, the idea of *heritage* always includes an axiological dimension. Thus, it will be only the traditions that society values positively which merit this denomination. For the majority of people, traditions such as: the torture of animals in Spanish bullfighting, the old Indian institution of sati in which widows are burned after the death of their husbands, or a tradition that has disappeared in China, the binding of women’s feet, can hardly be understood as *cultural heritage* which deserves to be conserved and promoted. In some of the definitions which have been

given in relation to heritage, the axiological component is not left out¹.

Furthermore, if we take into account that *intangible heritage* has been defined by UNESCO as “the essential source of an identity deeply rooted in the past”² the socially subjective component of this

¹ For instance: “For the purposes of the present Convention, intangible cultural heritage means the practices and representations – together with their necessary knowledge, skills, instruments, objects, artefacts and places – that are recognized by communities and individuals as their intangible cultural heritage, and are consistent with universally accepted principles of human rights, equity, sustainability, and mutual respect between cultural communities. This intangible cultural heritage is constantly re-created by communities in response to their environment and historical conditions of existence, and provides them with a sense of continuity and identity, thus promoting cultural diversity and the creativity of humankind” (van Zanten, 2002).

² *Guidelines for the Establishment of a ‘Living Human Treasures’ System*, UNESCO, 1989

concept appears visible enough. After all, as we are today well aware, what we term as *tradition* means, in fact, a vision of the past according to our present perspective and values.

Anthropology investigates culture and then brings to light the many different cultural manifestations of humankind. Yet, social forces will be the ones to decide what *cultural heritage* means: i.e. what merits being safeguarded, promoted and disseminated. The deciding of what will be considered *cultural heritage* concerns not only anthropology. However, through its discoveries and theoretical work, this discipline has an important role regarding all other kinds of reflection necessary for correctly discerning cultural manifestations worth preserving as well as for ensuring that such preservation is appropriately followed through. Another contribution which anthropology can also provide regarding the question of intangible heritage is to point out concrete cases of cultural manifestations not sufficiently taken into account as examples of cultural heritage, despite the fact that they may be worthy. The reasons behind why they are disregarded may be diverse in nature; for instance: ignorance, because they do not constitute spectacular manifestations or because they collide with certain values of those who make decisions. Surely, we could find several examples which illustrate this circumstance. This is the case, for instance, of the custom of body modification – concretely, body painting or tattoo – which, with more or less intensity, we find all over the world. This is, undeniable, an interesting case which makes us doubt if we should label it as material or intangible heritage. In fact, we also know that this dichotomy between material and non-material cultural heritage is a too Cartesian approach, given that there is no material culture which we can detach from what it is intangible, and there is no intangible culture that has nothing to do with the material world. But what happens with tattoo? The Italian anthropologist Alberto Cirese spoke of *somatic cultural goods* –i.e., something that affects the body and in opposition to extra-somatic– when he referred to knowledge, competences, memories; that is to say, all which has to do with the notion we have of intangible heritage (quoted in Clemente, 2000:31). Given that tattoo without the human body would not have meaning, can it not be considered a somatic cultural heritage?

When the person dies, that is the bearer of tattoo, this cultural manifestation disappears as well. We already know the importance tattoo has within the tradition of some cultures. Tattoo not only has aesthetic connotations but its functions can be manifold –on some occasions, directly related to the sphere of beliefs and social structure of the collectivity; on other occasions, related to the idea of

individuality. It is extremely curious that Western society is experiencing an increasing interest in tattoo with more and more young people having their skin tattooed and that tattoo studios are offering completely descontextualized designs and motifs imported from non-Western cultures³, while in non-Western societies the practice and techniques of tattoo are gradually disappearing without receiving due recognition in most cases. Above, we said that the idea of cultural heritage is directly tied to values viewed positively by society, and we also know very well that in Western society people have historically seen tattoo in a very negative manner. People have associated tattoo with criminals or marginal people. Christian missionaries, with the good will of the colonial powers, prohibited people from cultures that practiced this kind of body alteration to do it. Perhaps this is an important reason for the fact that people normally do not think of tattoo when we speak of *intangible heritage*. However, in the tradition of several cultures, things are or were much different. The *moko* or tattooing of the face that Maoris of New Zealand traditionally have and which gives unique and unmistakable marks to a person, the elaborated designs of Polynesia, the tattoos of the population of Borneo or the Maghreb, among many others, are or were also very important for the tradition of these cultures.

We know that tattoo techniques date back to the dawn of humankind, at least we can prove it from the Neolithic era. Nevertheless in relation to the Western culture, the church prohibitions are the most powerful reason for the banishment of tattoo within the Christian world. We may remember that in the year 787, for instance, Pope Hadrian I issued a papal edict against tattooing because its associations with pagan beliefs. Tattoos then being very exceptional in Europe, they were reintroduced in the 18th century chiefly through sailors who came back from their journeys in the South Seas, a geographic region where tattoo was regularly practised.

In spite of the attraction tattoos aroused among certain sectors of the population, we can say that up to the mid 20th century the tattoo practice, generally in minority, was considered typical for people of low moral standing. Cesare Lombroso, the Italian physician especially known for his works on criminal anthropology, in his publication *L'Uomo delinquente* (1876) clearly associated tattoos –which he considered obscene and degenerated– with delinquents, and other people identified tattoo with people with poor intelligence and culture. The Spanish physician Rafael Salillas, speaking of the

³ Within the current aesthetic of Body Art people speak of *modern primitives*.

tattoo practices among Western women in the beginning of the 20th century, wrote that tattoos were present “only exceptionally, among some of very low classes and degraded women”⁴. In Spain, in 1948, we can read about tattoos:

“it is normal among wild peoples and it is a sign of abnormality among the civilized peoples. Tattoo is frequent among mental ill, homosexuals, fanatics of diverse sects and also [...] the superstitious who believe that determined tattoos are talismans which serve for obtaining success in hazardous enterprises or for being saved from dangers and illness.”⁵

And even nowadays we can find sometimes attempts to relate the practice of tattooing with deviant behaviour or psychiatric disorders. So for instance, in a study carried on at the end of the nineties in New Zealand among a too small group of informants in order to avoid the possibility of any generalization at all was stated:

“tattooing was found in this study more often in women who perceive themselves as having been abused. This suggests some dissatisfaction with her sense of herself in her body and wish to improve this relationship by physical reconstruction”. (Romans, Martin, Morris and Harrison, 1998:139)

And researchers concluded saying:

“a tattoo should serve as a clinical reminder to think about the possibility or a psychiatric problem being present.” (Ibid.)

This negative view about tattoos has experienced in the West a noteworthy change, especially since the nineties. Nowadays there are many young people and also not so young people who do not renounce to indulge in giving their bodies a touch of personality through tattoos. Nevertheless the aversion towards body modification such as tattoo or scarification which has been characteristic for the Western world has caused these practices of body ornamentation to disappear gradually throughout the 20th century in several world cultures. The main reasons of this extinction are:

1. The loss of functionality. A lot of these body marks had to do with concrete aspects of tradition (rites of passage, identification with determined groups, beliefs) which because of acculturation processes in the contact of their bearers with the West have lost their validity.

2. The dynamic of fashion trends themselves within a given society. This is especially true for those cases in which body modification is done for aesthetic reasons.
3. Aversion by civil authorities. Often colonial authorities as well as the own local administration because of Western influence banned this kind of practice (for instance in Japan).
4. Aversion toward body modification by collectives with some moral authority, such as the Christian missionaries. As the missionaries in their evangelizing task gave much importance to the decorum regarding the body covering, they also damned tattoo and scarification practices.
5. The present globalization processes, especially through the powerful mass media have spread throughout the planet ideal images of the body, which correspond to Western criteria, regarding the beauty ideals as much as the social presentation of the body which generally advocates a body without marks of any kind. And if today the same mass media channels show tattooed bodies according to the new tattoo trends, these new tattoo practices – regarding not only designs but also the functionality and values which are behind them – also penetrate in geographic areas of the planet where traditional body ornamentation practices are disappearing and substitute them.

There are many cultures of the world which had a rich tradition in tattooing and because of direct or indirect Western influence they have lost this tradition or it is in the process of extinction. In this article I will focus on two very concrete cases: the Li people in Hainan⁶, in China, and the example of the population in Equatorial Guinea, in west central Africa.

China is not a country where tattoos abound but within this immensity from the geographical and cultural point of view as well, it is not surprising at all that in some remote places tattooing had been a habitual practice among the people. And this is the case of Hainan. This island situated in the south of China and having been in the past a place of exile is today one of the most valued tourist destinations for Chinese people although in general it is only attainable for the powerful and well-off classes. Hainan has nowadays slightly more than seven million inhabitants. The population of this Chinese island is not uniform regarding their ethnic origins. In

⁴ “sólo excepcionalmente en algunas mujeres de las clases más ínfimas y degradadas” (Salillas, 1908:14)

⁵ “es normal en los pueblos salvajes y es un indicio de anormalidad entre los pueblos civilizados. Es frecuente en los perturbados mentales, los invertidos, los fanáticos de diversas sectas y también [...] los supersticiosos, que creen que determinados tatuajes son talismanes para conseguir éxitos en empresas arriesgadas o para salvarse de peligros y enfermedades.” (Sánchez, 1948:284).

⁶ I have obtained the information and pictures about the Li tattooing practice from Joana Catot after a journey she made in Hainan in 2005.

addition to the Han, the quantitative dominant group and other ethnic groups like the Miao and Zhuang we also find the Li, an ethnicity which is composed of five subgroups which are known under the names Ha, Qi, Rum, Sai and Meifu. All these Li subgroups differentiated among them through their clothing, hair dressing, craftsmanship, etc. and evidently also through their different tattoos.

In Haikou, the Island's capital, it is not possible nowadays to see people with traditional tattoos engraved on their skin. Tattoos, in former times a common practice among the feminine population of the Li, are only found in bodies of elder women which generally live in the middle of the island or in villages with difficult access. In ancient times, given that every village no matter how small it was differentiated in a subtle manner from others through the tattoo design, those body marks belonged to the group identity of their inhabitants.

The traditional Li tattoo consists of a series of thin lines which descend from the cheek and chin to the neck until the navel area passing closely by the nipples. Also arms and legs are tattooed in a similar manner. There are designs of graceful geometry, with straight or curved lines, sometimes in patterns of parallel lines and always showing pleasant harmony.

The ink used by engraving these tattoos was always black. It was elaborated with lamp black and other ingredients and it was applied to the skin through different procedures. The most common of them consisted of introducing the ink under the epidermis puncturing the skin in a very regular manner with thorns of a shrub which grows abundantly on the island. Another habitual technique was inflicting small wounds in the skin with a tool made of very sharp prongs of bamboo. After that, the wounds were soaked and rubbed with ink. But also the inverse way could be done. At first the design was marked with a thread soaked in ink, in order to obtain straight lines, and after – following these lines – the tattoo was engraved on the body of those women for ever.

Among the Li people, tattoos were always made by women. They could belong to the family of the tattooed person or they could be a specialist of the village who was paid with barter for her work. In the traditional life of the Li, women were tattooed within the ages of nine and eighteen. There was not a special time for doing tattoos but some dates – especially the birthday – were considered taboo for this activity. Tattooing was made through diverse sessions. According to tradition the end of tattooing was celebrated with a party where relatives and friends were invited. This celebration constituted the final point of a rite of passage which meant that the tattooed adolescent could from then be considered adult and ready for mating and the posterior

motherhood.

In present times in Hainan, traditional tattoos are not only under-valued but even openly scorned. They are considered something ugly and typical for underdeveloped countries. And this negative view to this concrete aspect of the cultural tradition of the Li is due to a great extent to the will of the state's administration in order to banish these kinds of practices.

The small island of Hainan experienced a radical change after the Chinese communist revolution. Political directives forced the abandonment of traditional dress of the diverse ethnic groups which populated the island, as well their hair dressing, including for them the characteristic custom of wearing big earrings and the practice of tattooing as well. Women originally wore a short skirt which the new establishment would not like, given that they were obliged to sew the traditional skirts in the middle converting them in such a way in more modest shorts. Afterwards, this improvised article of clothing was progressively substituted in such a way in all the country generalized trousers with a sad gray or bluish tone.

The powerful Chinese communist state repressed even with punishment tattooing practices for considering them reactionary and an identification and differentiation symbol. In Hainan, then, because of fear of the authorities or because of the logical weakening of traditional practices in the face of the advance of the modern world, tattooing was completely abandoned.

It can be stated that in the traditional Hainan, women without tattoos were unthinkable. And it was important not only in the life of women but also after death. A woman could not join her forefathers without her prescriptive tattoo. Without these body marks it was as if she would appear nude and she would not be recognized nor accepted by her forefathers becoming then for this reason a sad errant spirit. This is why if a young woman died without having been tattooed before, people made the tattoo on her body after dying.

Nowadays tattoo in Hainan has fallen practically into oblivion. Many old women who still show the marks of the ancient tattoo do not remember the reason of their marks and they say mechanically, and repetitively to the younger women what Chinese authorities once made them believe in order to abandon such kind of a practice: that the ancient Li made tattoos with the aim of making young women ugly and avoiding in such a way her possible kidnapping.

In Hainan there were made some unsuccessful attempts in order to recover the tattooing practice by determined segments of the

population who were very conscientious of the value of old traditions. This happened especially in the period of the sixties and seventies, when a timid movement grew vindicating the Li culture. Nowadays in Hainan, people also speak of recovering old traditions but nobody is thinking on tattoo any more. It is easy to observe the revival of traditional tissues, of music, dance and festivals. The arrival of tourism is absolutely not an alien factor for this recovery. In any case it is possible to practice all these traditions during the weekend and come back to the normal and daily life after holidays have passed. But there are identification signs which are more difficult to recuperate, as is the case of tattoos. The tattoo is not a symbol only for the weekend. The mark on the skin is a symbol for the whole life and today life in Hainan is markedly different to some decades ago.

Another interesting example is that of Equatorial Guinea in Central Africa. This case is also very symptomatic of the changes which in the last century body modification practices such as tattooing and scarification have experienced. Bubi and Fang, the most important ethnic groups of this small country from the quantitative point of view, have very characteristic traditions regarding tattoo and scarification practices. In the island of Bioko, which is mainly populated by Bubi it was usual to practice two main types of scarification. The first and most widespread consisted of making cuts in the face which could be quite deep, in form of parallel lines. This was done between the ages of three and five years by girls and boys. After cutting the face, wounds were handled so that big scars resulted. In this way Bubi people appeared to the European "horribly ugly, disfigured and repugnant"⁷. According to Antonio Aymemí, a Spanish priest who at the beginning of the 20th century wrote some articles about the Bubi, the aim of these scarifications on the face was the possibility of recognition among the members of the same tribe in case of banishment or slavery (Aymemí, 1942:25). Whatever the case, the fact is that these characteristic scarifications were clear identity signs, a reality which was recognized by old people who today still conserve these marks on their faces (See: Mobajale et al., 2002:13).

Beside these scarifications, Bubi people practiced also other scarification types with ornamental aims with designs in which vegetal motives predominated. Different from the former, "These tattoos beautifully adorn the body. [...] Generally, only the young women had them, though on rare occasion a man would tattoo himself. In the present day, as all Bubi dress decently, this custom has

disappeared". All these types of scarifications were abandoned at the end of the first third of the 20th century.

Very interesting are also the traditional tattoos made by the Fang in the continental part of Equatorial Guinea. The traditional ways of body ornamentation practiced in the past by the Fang were tattoos, scarifications – scars made mainly by cutting but also by fire (branding) and body painting in this last case for ceremonial reasons (Tessmann, 2003:218). We have some studies on these tattoos and that is why we know that they were extremely rich regarding figurative and symbolic designs as well. Men and women ornamented their bodies with these designs mainly on the face, chest and arms. Tattoos were made not only for aesthetical purposes but they had especially to do with group identity and determined rites of passage.

In a study on Fang tattoos carried out by the Catalan anthropologist Jordi Sabater Pi, in the fifties of the 20th century in Equatorial Guinea he stated "Tattoos have virtually disappeared from Africa"⁸. But as I was able to verify with fieldwork I carried out in 2006 in the same country this was not exactly true. It is true that traditional tattoos have practically disappeared. Nowadays it is extremely difficult to find someone with such tattoos. In the same manner as we saw by the Li in the Chinese Island of Hainan, they are always aged people who normally dwell in small villages in the jungle. But there are many young people who show some type of tattoo although they have little to do with the traditional one and more –on the other hand– with the present globalization processes.

I carried out my research in the city of Bata, the second town in importance of Equatorial Guinea. It is a town of approximately 70.000 inhabitants. So as I said we cannot find in this town any traditional tattoos but people generally remember to have seen some of them on some occasion. I carried out interviews and in general people had no negative opinion about these kinds of body modifications which was different from what I was expecting (in the Maghreb for instance traditional tattoos are seen as backward and this is one reason for their present-day extinction, something similar to what we have already seen also for Hainan). As they said to me, old people were proud of having a tattoo. People said it was tradition and they had no other option regarding this. Young people had little knowledge about old tattoos. They knew there were bodily marks which could signify very concrete things such as the belonging to a determined village or in the case of

⁷ "horriblemente feos, desfigurados y repugnantes." (Aymemí, 1942:25).

⁸ "Els tatuatges han desaparegut, virtualment, de l'Àfrica." (Sabater and Sabater, 1992:34).

women to point out that they were married. The thing they most wondered was if people could have their face marked in such a way. Nowadays no young people would do that.

There are parts of the world like for instance Tahiti or Polynesia in general, a very rich region in tattoo traditions, where within the folklorism practices or revival movements so typical for our times, people recuperate the designs of old tattoos. Nevertheless this is currently not the case for Equatorial Guinea. During my fieldwork I did not see any sign or clear manifestation of some kind of revival regarding the formerly rich tattoo tradition of the country. Such tradition has nothing to do with present daily life. There are many individuals who have some kind of tattoo engraved on their skin but nothing that resembles those traditional tattoos. It was very interesting to observe the change of values regarding tattoos among recent generations. This change was paradigmatically well represented by a young woman I interviewed who had some modern tattoos on her skin. Her grandmother had had the traditional Fang tattoos on her body. The mother on the other hand had no tattoo at all and she had internalized the negative valuation regarding tattoos which were introduced in the country through the colonial administration. She criticized her daughter strongly for having tattoos. But nevertheless the daughter was very proud of the lovely tattoos she had on her skin.

The tattoos we can see nowadays among the population in continental Equatorial Guinea are mostly made in an amateur manner or there are tattoos which have been done by experts abroad. In the city of Bata there is currently very few tattoo studios for professional tattooing. Everyone can make these tattoos. At first the desired pattern is made by a normal ball-point pen and then tattooers puncture it into the skin by means of three sewing needles tied together. As a pigment they use an ink made of lamp black and water. The first hours after the tattooing the wound cannot get wet but no additional antiseptic procedure is taken for treating it.

The individuals I interviewed told me that motivations of present tattoos had nothing to do with traditional ones. Today people wear tattoos above all for fashion and aesthetic reasons. But in spite of this it is also clear that today tattooing is narrowly related with identity matters –not group identity as was the case in former times but individual one.

The most elemental tattoo which is very easy to see in Bata reproduces the name of the person who wears it. They are worn indistinctly by women and men, especially on the arm but also on other parts of the body. Very often tattoos show some characteristics of their bearer and especially in these

cases we can observe gender differences. Typically men's tattoos are for instance designs representing scorpions, snakes –a big anaconda with an open mouth – crabs, tigers... People spoke to me of these tattoos as “*cosas fuertes*” –strong matters– which correspond to men. On the other hand the characteristic women's designs were butterflies, flowers or pigeons. If a man wears such tattoos he could be the object of ridicule. Other tattoos which are relatively popular among the present Equatorial Guinea population are the star, moon or the horoscope sign. Very often people wear more than one of these simple tattoos.

Besides those designs which are related with some individual characteristics there are also other usual tattoos which externalize signs of affection such as the heart with an arrow or inscriptions like “*tu y yo*” (you and me), “*mi amor*” (my love, my darling) “*mi vida*” (my life, my darling), or the well known tattoo which reproduces the name of the loved person. These tattoos are worn mainly on the arm, chest, leg, the back of the neck or on the back.

Not everyone looks kindly on the present tattooing in Equatorial Guinea. This is not a very wide-spread attitude but nevertheless, according to my informants people may think of a very tattooed man as a “*bandido*” (bandit), or “*delincuente*” (delinquent) and in the case of women they can be perceived as a “*mujeres de calle*” (prostitutes). In these cases they reproduce the same mental schemes which we also find in Europe and which would also belong to the colonial administrators in Equatorial Guinea who came from the Spanish state.

Nevertheless not all tattoos which nowadays are worn by the population of Equatorial Guinea have to do with identity or aesthetic matters. There are protection tattoos which in this case, although they may show modern designs, are related to traditions of the country regarding the functionality of tattooing. So for instance, I interviewed a young Guinean man of the ndowe ethnicity who had a big spider as a tattoo on his arm. He told me he had it made because he was afraid of spiders, he saw them even in his dreams. During a stay in Gabon someone told him he could free himself from such irrational fear. With this aim the healer engraved the spider tattoo in his skin and carried out a complementary ritual in which a living big and hairy spider was put in a casserole and it was burned up until it became ashes. Then the healer made some small cuts in the back of the young Guinean and rubbed the spider ashes on him. Other tattoos with protection function can be the initials of determined words or even the Christian cross.

Beliefs in witchcraft are today still very wide-spread in Equatorial Guinea. In fact witchcraft is an everyday reality. Very often in my interviews

we began speaking of tattoos and ended up speaking about witchcraft, especially from the very feared *ekong* a form of witchcraft in which after killing a person her or his body is stolen from the grave and turned into a zombie⁹. That is why it is very important to protect the body against this kind of powerful witchcraft, and many of the protections are engraved on the skin in the form of tattoos or scars made by cutting or branding.

Many of the traditional techniques of body modification have already disappeared or they are clearly in recession. The examples we have seen of the Li in Hainan and Equatorial Guinea testify this fact. Obviously the present globalization processes are a powerful reason for the decline of these practices. Old values, aesthetics and beliefs are given up in the face of new worldviews which because of the influence of more powerful cultural fluxes in alliance with very concrete political and economic interests, are considered better for the present times by the population where changes are happening.

The European colonization of the 19th and 20th centuries contributed to eradicate many of these practices. The zeal of Christian missionaries who identified tattooing with pagan beliefs or with a sinful flesh glorification led to the extinction of tattoo in many zones where it was habitual. This is for instance the case of Polynesia where the thread of tradition is being broken albeit noteworthy exceptions such as Samoa where traditional tattooing has been conserved until today. The adoption of clothes in many areas of the world which were colonized by Europeans where because of good climate conditions people lived in nudity before the arrival of Europeans caused the practice of tattooing to lose a good part of its meaning. Tattoo was also seen as a signal of underdevelopment with regard to the colonial powers or the Western influence. For this reason tattoo was often prohibited not only by colonial administrators but also by local rulers such as for instance in Japan. In this country, where tattooing had a long tradition, this practice of body modification was forbidden in 1872, shortly after the opening of this Asian country to the West. Although this prohibition had little success, tattooing was legalized again in 1948.

The modernization which has taken place in the Maghreb, especially during the second part of the 20th century, caused the decline of rich tattoo traditions, first in the urban zones and after in rural areas as well. Sometimes modernization has conserved in some places the tattooing practices but losing a good part of their old social meaning given that tattoo at the end is reduced as a merely aesthetical phenomenon. Today –within the

revivalism which characterizes our epoch– in many places where tradition has been lost, people try to recover it. Designs are recuperated but what it is more difficult to recover are the traditional social meanings which were associated to tattooing. This is so because these traditional significations are not known any more or because the needs and values of the current society are so different that their recovery makes no sense. So, for instance, the traditional Polynesian tattoo which in former times could mean social status today is seen more as a sign of ethnic identification. On occasions, the hygienic requirements of today's society prevent the rescue of these traditions. In Tahiti, for instance, in year 1986 the traditional tattooing technique which people wanted to recuperate had to be forbidden because of the difficulty of sterilizing the wood tools which had to be used if people wanted to be completely loyal to tradition.

Tourism has also contributed to the conservation or recovery of traditions which are related to tattooing, piercings or other kinds of body modifications, like for instance the old custom of Padaung Myanmar women of carrying heavy metal rings on the neck. Tourists get pictures of themselves taken accompanied by showy Polynesian tattooed bodies although very often the traditional designs do not appear as a true tattoo but in the easier manner of body painting which allows doing and removing it at will. In this case, then, forms are conserved, but functions and meanings change radically.

The traditional practice of tattooing is being modified through the present globalization processes. When people speak of globalization very often it is said, in a too simplistic manner, that globalization does not lead to a cultural uniformization (Beck, 2001:87). It is stated that there are manifold local answers to the same cultural product which is spread through globalization channels. Nevertheless this has to be relativized. Perhaps we can say that global culture is not exactly the same as uniform culture, but what is undeniable is that there is uniformization on the structural level. The kaleidoscope may serve as a metaphor in order to understand this reality. Let's imagine cultures as kaleidoscopes. Globalization puts in contact these different kaleidoscopes each of them with its own colored tumbling objects and internal structures. Globalization would lead to bring together all these kaleidoscopes in one unique device. This resulting kaleidoscope would have many more colours than each of the previous devices taken separately. But on the other hand all these coloured beads would have to obey one unique structure, the structure of the resulting kaleidoscope. Colours may be added but all different structures of each kaleidoscope taken separately have to be sacrificed in

⁹ See, for instance, Martí, 2008.

benefit of one unique resultant structure, the structure of the *globalized kaleidoscope*. And this is what actually happens with culture within globalization processes. On the surface level, individuals have more choices regarding culture consumption. In Western society we can choose among very different food, music, dress style alternatives, and even religious beliefs. And many of these new possibilities come from everywhere in the world. But the socio-cultural structures which not only manage these different consumptions but also create new needs for them are more and more uniform.

The present practice of body modification constitutes a clear example for these globalization processes. If we think about Western society, we can say that on the surface level tattooing has been enriched through the adoption of a great diversity of patterns and designs. Today tattoo studios offer their clients from the in other times typical tattoos of the heart pierced with an arrow to Japanese, Polynesian or Native American tattoos. We speak of *tribal tattoos* coming from all corners of the world as well as of *modern primitives* in relation to the new body modification fashion. All these new forms of body modification have reached Western society after they have been subdued to determined standardization processes. There are new forms which have been widespread through globalization but this apparent diversification conceals a certain structural poverty. It is no more the particular worldview of each group that determines the meanings, functions and uses of body modifications but certain aesthetical and consumerism unified models. The present world system leads to structural uniformization: procedures and techniques of current tattoo shops which are found practically everywhere are shaped under the same patterns, people feel the need to have a tattooed body because of aesthetical reasons, people consider desirable to imitate the tattooed bodies of stars from music (Eminem, The Backstreet Boys) movies (Jack Nicholson, Jessica Alba, BruceLee) or sport scenes (David Beckham)¹⁰. The production of difference belongs to the logic of capitalism (Erlmann, 1993:265), but the same logic demands also a uniformation on the structural level. We have not to forget that:

“a system that constitutively produces difference remains a system all the same. Difference, in this interpretation, is no longer an antithesis to the system, it is drawn back inside the system.” (Erlmann, 1993:266)

We know that globalization is changing our world and according to this, globalization is also changing the relationship people have with their own bodies. More and more, the body does not reflect any more particular worldviews of particular cultures or societies but uniformized attitudes coming from dominant paradigms. We have today not only internationalized sample catalogues regarding tattoos but also practices of body modification such as piercings or plastic surgery which are understood according to standardized beauty norms or determined social codes.

Tattooing and body modification in general also have to be considered in relation to the issue of intangible heritage. They are cultural expressions which are not always correctly taken into account when we construct our lists of cultural goods to be protected because perhaps they do not match the criteria of socially and culturally hegemonic layers in spite of the relevance for their bearers. We must never forget that these examples of intangible heritage which we consider worthy of safeguarding are, in fact, cultural expressions of all of humankind. So as stated by the Spanish writer, Juan Goytisolo, when he spoke of the value that the square of Jema el-Fna in Marrakech possesses in terms of intangible heritage, the square belongs to all of humanity in the same manner as the Mediterranean belongs to the planet. So it should be with all kinds of cultural manifestations which we decide to understand as a *cultural heritage*.

It is clear that not all types of cultural heritage have to be conserved. Tattoos and body modifications are the reflection of concrete worldviews and if these change, it makes no sense the will to conserve against wind and tide all cultural practices which are attached to them. But it does not have to mean that these aspects of our cultural heritage do not deserve our attention in order to safeguard them not for their daily practice but at least for the knowledge of their existence. They belong also to the history of these cultures which now are experiencing such great changes and for this reason they belong to the history of humankind in general as well.

¹⁰ See for instance:
http://www.vanishingtattoo.com/celebrity_tattoos_a.htm.
 [consulted on January 2007]

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